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Teen phenom serves notice

Canadian tennis is looking for its next star and Mike Ulmer thinks he might have found her

By MIKE ULMER -- Toronto Sun

Sharon Fichman saw it coming.

The lost childhood question usually pops up. It's only a question of when.

"I guess you've heard this one before," I said.

"I get it a lot," she said, graciously.

This fall, Sharon Fichman enters her Grade 9 year at Forest Hill Collegiate Institute.

She is just 13 years old and already has seen much of the world: Italy, Brazil, Germany, the United States.

Sharon Fichman is a tennis prodigy who first picked up a racquet when she was three and won her first tournament at six.

She is also Canada's reigning under-18 indoor girls champ, having won the singles and, with partner Melanie Gloria, the doubles title in April.

Only two other Canadian women have captured the under-18 singles title at 13, Helen Kelesi and Carling Bassett. That's not bad company.

Canadian doubles star Daniel Nestor and Fichman were on hand yesterday to promote the opening of the spanking new Rexall Centre at York University.

The Tennis Masters Canada men's event will serve as the inaugural tournament for the facility, July 24 to Aug. 1.

It shouldn't surprise you that Sharon Fichman's goal is to be a top 10-player.

"That has been my dream for a while," she said. "I'd love to be able to travel and make a living out of tennis."

She practises and trains three hours a day, five or six days a week.

Hers is a family of achievers. Her parents, Julia and Bobby, emigrated from Romania to Israel and then, five years ago, to Canada.

Bobby was a semi-pro tennis player. Now he's a nuclear engineer.

His daughter said she inherited her competitiveness not from her father but from her brother, Thomas.

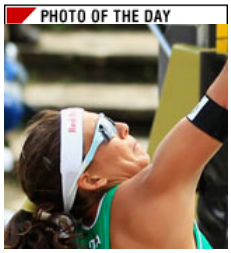
"We'd play together at the park and we'd have to race each other up the hill and it was important who was the fastest," she said. "It has always been with me, this always wanting to win. Losing was never good enough."

"Some kids enjoy being motivated and competing at a young age. Some don't. Everyone is different."

Fichman's style is a counter-punching baseliner, but she prides herself on being able to play any style.

Her idol is Belgian Justine Henin-Hardenne.

"I've been a fan since she won the U.S. Open last year," Fichman said. "There is just something special about her that



is inexplicable. Her will, her mental abilities are what set her apart."

By now you've deduced that Sharon Fichman isn't like other 13-year-olds. She doesn't use the word "like" two or three times a sentence.

The notion that an adult mind is inhabiting a kid's body doesn't wash either. Most adults don't speak as coherently as she does.

All of this brings us back to the kid question.

For every phenom bustling through childhood, there seems to be a 20-year-old lamenting a lost childhood.

Some rebel against it while still in their teens, see: Capriati, Jennifer.

Of course, the notion of a 13-year-old boy who practises his hockey three hours every day doesn't seem quite so off-putting.

It really comes down to happiness. Who would have told Wayne Gretzky to knock off the hockey stuff and be a kid?

Sharon Fichman understands that the question has to be asked. She has given it some thought and decided, all in all, she loves her life.

"What am I missing out in terms of being a kid? Well, there are good things and bad things. I don't get to hang out with friends as much. The good thing is I've made a lot of friends in tennis.

"I know how it feels to be grown up and I think I've learned a lot really fast."

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